

7 October 1966

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Comment on Couve de Murville's Talk
With Secretary Rusk

The French Position

1. Couve's position on Vietnam is basically a reiteration of the stand that De Gaulle first publicly spelled out in July 1964. The only new element is a French admission that De Gaulle's call in Phnom Penh for a withdrawal of "foreign forces" from South Vietnam was intended to cover the withdrawal of North Vietnamese regulars. De Gaulle had not made this point clear and, in fact, seemed indirectly to exclude North Vietnam by his emphasis on the US role in the war and the need for Washington to announce a decision to withdraw.

2. The French had indicated in August of 1966 that Paris had never implied that the US should withdraw prior to negotiations, but that it should be clear that the withdrawal was one of the objects of negotiations. Implicit in both this statement and Couve's comments is the idea that the US need only agree to withdraw beforehand but could always revoke that agreement if, in negotiations, the other side proved intractable.

3. Couve appeared to be excusing De Gaulle's failure to take account of the US letter in his speech by emphasizing the lack of time and the absence of a specific US request to intervene or mediate. In any case, Paris would have been reluctant to act as a go-between because it believes there is not sufficient "give" on the part of any of the concerned parties at this point. Negotiations would thus be doomed to failure and French prestige would suffer as a result.

Couve's Assertions on Vietnam

4. We think Couve probably overestimates the difficulty of identifying the hard-core regrouped southerners who have come down over the past few years from North Vietnam

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to encadre the Viet Cong. These elements probably would be sorted out from the rest of the southern population given proper supervision of a withdrawal. There can be no doubt that, if the regrouped southern cadre were left in the South at the end of hostilities, their presence would be a big asset for the Viet Cong in maintaining a position of strength in the postwar South. The Ky government, we know, is quite worried over the problem of Viet Cong residual armed strength following a postwar settlement.

5. Couve's views on the origin of the war are about 180 degrees from our own. On the basis of considerable evidence provided by captured documents, prisoners, and intercepted communications, it has been conclusively proved that the war in the South is not an internal South Vietnamese affair but one planned and run from North Vietnam. There is good evidence, in fact, that the decision to launch a full-scale military insurgency in South Vietnam was made in Hanoi in 1958 or 1959. It is interesting that Couve would mention the fact that there are 47,500 North Vietnamese troops in the South and in practically the same breath claim the war is an internal South Vietnamese affair.

6. We also disagree completely with Couve's view that the NLFV acts independently of Hanoi. There is conclusive evidence to prove that the Front is the creature of Hanoi--planned and created by the North Vietnamese. Contrary to Couve's implication, on the issue of reunification both Hanoi and the Front take the position that this is far in the future and must follow the establishment of a postwar government in the South.

7. Couve also has his facts wrong, we think, on the question of Hanoi's willingness to enter into negotiations in late 1964 and early 1965. There is good evidence that the North Vietnamese were interested in pursuing U Thant's proposal for a meeting with the US in Burma sometime prior to the November elections in 1964. It appears, however, that they agreed only because they thought the US was willing to make some concessions in its position at this time, and not out of any desire to seek a reasonable settlement of the war.

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8. As for Couve's claim that the Vietnamese Communists were willing to negotiate unconditionally in January and February 1965, the evidence actually points in the other direction. Hanoi's position had been clearly outlined in various DRV propaganda statements prior to Pham Van Dong's speech setting forth the four points in April 1965. Dong said, in fact, that he was codifying terms for an end to the war that had long been held by Hanoi.

9. Couve's assertion that the Communists cannot stop the fighting and then pick it up at a later date as easily as the US is an interesting point. The intelligence community is generally divided in its view of what a long period of military standdown and negotiations would do to the Viet Cong fighting forces. Some believe it is the very nature of the guerrilla war that the enemy forces can go underground for long periods of time and retain an effective military apparatus. Other analysts think that a loss of military momentum by the Viet Cong could be a disastrous blow. Actually, the evidence on both sides is still inconclusive.

Cambodia

10. Couve de Murville's remarks on Cambodia are generally in line with our own interpretation of Sihanouk's current policy. His observation that Phnom Penh is not seeking a resumption of diplomatic relations with the US, although it does want an easing of tensions, agrees with Sihanouk's public statements on this issue.

11. It is interesting that Couve took the opportunity while in Phnom Penh to inform the Cambodians that the US is interested in better relations and does not desire that Cambodia alter its present neutralist policy. Couve also implied that he tried to smooth the way for a future visit by Governor Harriman by presenting the US view on the Thlok Trak border incident.

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Requested by Mr. Helms. Copies delivered to Lehman for Smith for Helms.